

## Ghost 192

Chapter 192: when hooves rulled the palace

The Crowd Gathers

The stands and open grounds were packed.

Servants climbed onto stone ledges. Palace maids clutched handkerchiefs, eyes shining. Guards formed loose lines to keep order, but even they were smiling.

Two factions formed naturally—loudly.

"Prince Liang! Prince Liang!" "Our prince rides like the wind!"

"No—His Majesty!" "The Emperor never loses!" "Watch closely!"

Shouts overlapped, laughter burst out, and playful arguments broke out everywhere.

Coins were wagered discreetly. Pride was wagered openly.

No one spoke of dark omens. No one whispered of possession or curses. For the first time in days, fear was drowned by excitement.

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The Women of the Palace

At the front of the viewing area stood the Empress, calm but visibly intrigued. This was the first true horse race she had witnessed in this world, and she could not deny the spark of anticipation tightening her chest.

Beside her stood Princess Zhi, supported by a maid. Though pale, her eyes were bright, focused entirely on the track.

"I used to watch him ride before," Princess Zhi said softly, referring to Prince Liang. "He always loved speed."

The Empress nodded, glancing toward the start line.

Behind them, Lady Chen stood with composed elegance, hands folded neatly, eyes attentive—but calculating. She smiled when the crowd cheered, though her gaze lingered longer on the Emperor than the race itself.

Further back, the Dowager Empress sat beneath a canopy, expression unreadable. She did not cheer, did not clap—only watched. Carefully. As if measuring something invisible.

One absence went unnoticed by most.

Shin Gu was nowhere to be seen.

No whispers followed her absence.

No one asked.

The race had claimed everyone's attention completely.

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The Riders Appear

A hush rippled through the crowd as two figures emerged.

The Emperor mounted first.

Dressed simply in riding attire, hair tied back without ornaments, he looked nothing like the ruler burdened by ministers and dark secrets. Sunlight caught the sharp line of his profile, his posture relaxed yet commanding.

A wave of cheers surged.

Then Prince Liang appeared.

He swung onto his horse with familiar ease, a grin already tugging at his lips as if this moment alone had peeled years from his shoulders. His horse stamped impatiently, sensing the excitement.

More cheers—louder, bolder.

The ground trembled with voices.

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Two Teams, One Track

"PRINCE LIANG!" "HIS MAJESTY!" "PRINCE LIANG!" "HIS MAJESTY!"

The chants grew rhythmic, almost like war drums.

Even the Empress felt her pulse sync with the sound.

Princess Zhi leaned forward unconsciously. Lady Chen's fingers tightened briefly before relaxing again. The Dowager's gaze sharpened.

At the start line, the two riders exchanged a glance.

Prince Liang smirked. "Still think you'll win?"

The Emperor replied calmly, "I know I will."

The flag was raised.

Silence fell so suddenly it felt unreal.

Then—

The flag dropped.

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The Race

They exploded forward.

Hooves struck the ground like thunder, dirt spraying into the air as the horses surged ahead. The Emperor took an early lead, guiding his horse with precise control, movements minimal but perfect.

Prince Liang followed close behind, laughing as he urged his horse faster, daring the wind itself to keep up.

The crowd roared.

"They're flying!" "Faster—faster!"

The track curved, banners whipping wildly as both riders leaned low. For a moment, Prince Liang pulled even, his horse stretching forward, neck and neck with the Emperor's.

Princess Zhi gasped softly.

The Empress's hands clenched at her sides.

The final stretch approached.

Prince Liang pushed hard, teeth bared in a grin, while the Emperor narrowed his eyes and leaned forward just enough—

Not reckless. Not desperate. Certain.

They crossed the line in a blur.

For a heartbeat, no one knew.

Then the signal was given.

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Victory and Laughter

"THE EMPEROR!" "HIS MAJESTY WON!"

Cheers exploded.

Prince Liang slowed his horse, breathless, then burst into laughter.

"Tch. Still infuriating," he said aloud, loud enough for nearby guards to hear.

The Emperor dismounted smoothly, expression calm—but his eyes were bright.

The crowd surged forward, applause thunderous.

Princess Zhi smiled genuinely for the first time in days.

Lady Chen clapped softly, eyes thoughtful.

The Dowager Empress exhaled slowly, as if releasing a breath she had been holding for far too long.

And the Empress—

She watched the two men standing on the track, dust-covered, smiling, alive—and felt something shift.

The palace felt lighter.

For now.

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What No One Noticed

As laughter echoed and excitement lingered, no one noticed the brief flicker of unease that rippled through the air.

No one noticed how the wind stilled for a fraction of a second.

No one noticed the absence of one woman watching from the shadows.

The race had lifted spirits—

But somewhere unseen, something had also been disturbed.

The cheers had not yet settled when the truth became clear.

The Emperor had won.

The riding grounds erupted.

"HIS MAJESTY!" "THE EMPEROR WINS!" "LONG LIVE HIS MAJESTY!"

Guards struck spear butts against the ground in rhythm, servants clapped without restraint, and even the most reserved ministers allowed themselves smiles. The air was filled with dust, laughter, and the sharp scent of sweat and horsehair.

Prince Liang reined his horse to a stop, chest rising as he caught his breath. Then he threw his head back and laughed openly, the sound bright and carefree.

"Every single time," he said, shaking his head as he dismounted. "You always win."

He walked toward the Emperor and clapped him hard on the shoulder. "At least this time you could've slowed down and let me take the glory."

The Emperor dismounted as well, brushing dust from his sleeve, lips curving into an easy smile.

"I didn't want to," he replied calmly.

Prince Liang raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Since when are you this serious about a race?"

The Emperor glanced—not deliberately, not obviously—but just enough.

Toward the stands.

Toward where the Empress was watching.

Then he laughed, low and relaxed. "Because my wife is watching."

Prince Liang froze for half a breath.

Then he burst out laughing again, louder than before.

"Since when did you start caring about that?" he teased. "You used to ride like you had nothing to lose."

The Emperor did not answer immediately. His gaze lingered on the track ahead, then flicked once more toward the stands.

"People change," he said simply.

Prince Liang studied him, amusement slowly giving way to something more curious.

"You've changed," he said. "Suddenly you care who's watching. Suddenly you don't want to lose."

The Emperor smiled, this time without denying it.

Behind them, the crowd continued celebrating—oblivious to the quiet shift between the two men.

And in the distance, the Empress met the Emperor's gaze for a fleeting moment before looking away, pretending not to notice the warmth that had just spread through her chest.

The riding grounds were still alive with noise when the Emperor and Prince Liang walked together toward the viewing platform.

Dust clung to their boots, horses were being led away, and the cheers slowly softened into excited chatter. What remained was a bright, festive warmth—rare inside the palace walls.

On the platform, the Dowager Empress sat at the center, regal as ever. Beside her stood Lady Chen, composed and smiling, while Princess Zhi and the Empress sat slightly to the side.

Lady Chen was the first to step forward.

She bowed gracefully, her voice gentle and proper.

"Congratulations, Your Majesty. Your riding today was extraordinary."

The Emperor nodded in acknowledgment. "Thank you."

Prince Liang, however, did not stop with formalities.

He walked straight to Princess Zhi, took her hand without hesitation, and pressed a light kiss to her knuckles.

"You watched the entire race," he said with a grin. "I couldn't afford to embarrass myself too badly."

Princess Zhi flushed instantly, trying—and failing—to hide her smile.

"You rode very well," she said softly.

Only then did Prince Liang turn toward the Empress, offering her a respectful nod.

"Sister-in-law."

The Empress returned the greeting calmly, her expression warm but reserved.

A moment later, the Emperor stepped forward as well, standing beside the Dowager Empress and Lady Chen. Princess Zhi and the Empress both inclined their heads.

"Congratulations, Your Majesty," Princess Zhi said sincerely.

"Yes," the Empress added. "It was a wonderful race."

The Dowager Empress gave a rare approving hum. "It has been a long time since the palace felt this lively."

The Emperor looked around—at the gathered family, the relaxed expressions, the faint smiles that had replaced weeks of tension.

"Since everyone is together today," he said casually, "why don't we continue like this?"

He turned his gaze to the Empress.

"Why don't you cook for everyone tonight?"

For half a heartbeat, the platform went quiet.

The Empress blinked, then nodded without hesitation.

"Alright."

Prince Liang laughed lightly. "That's a great idea. I've heard too many praises already—I want to see if they're true."

Princess Zhi smiled, clearly pleased.

But beside the Dowager Empress, Lady Chen's smile stiffened almost imperceptibly.

She exchanged a glance with the Dowager Empress—brief, sharp, and heavy with meaning.

They shared the same thought.

Her cooking is good.

That's why he goes to her.

That's why he keeps choosing her.

The Dowager Empress said nothing, her expression unreadable.

Lady Chen lowered her gaze politely, but her fingers tightened within her sleeves.

The Emperor, unaware—or perhaps choosing not to be—turned back toward the Empress.

"Then it's settled."

And just like that, what had begun as a simple horse race quietly shifted into something else entirely.